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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001630

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S CALL ON FORMER PM BANHARN SILAPA-ARCHA

REF: A. BANGKOK 1538 (CHATURON WORRIED)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 1034 (CHATURON DEFIES RESTRICTIONS)

[1](#)C. 06 BANGKOK 5536 (MEETING WITH BANHARN)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Former Prime Minister Banharn Silapa-Archa told the Ambassador that the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) had lost most of its influence, and fair elections would show a sharp decline in support for TRT. Banharn foresaw moderate growth for his own Chart Thai Party. He staunchly opposed a proposed constitutional provision allowing any person other than an elected legislator from becoming Prime Minister, but he expressed ambivalence about other potential ways in which the constitution might reshape Thai politics. Banharn spoke highly of Prime Minister Surayud's character and dismissed the possibility of further military intervention in politics. He doubted the authorities would prosecute TRT's Party Leader for engaging in campaign-like activities. End Summary.

THAKSIN AND THAI RAK THAI

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador called on former Prime Minister Banharn Silapa-Archa at Chart Thai Party headquarters on March 16, meeting him for the first time since the September 19 coup. Banharn said that he did not support the military's seizure of power, but former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's actions left the country with no choice. At the time of the coup, with weeks remaining before national elections were likely to take place, unspecified Thai Rak Thai (TRT) figures had already begun vote-buying efforts. Banharn said he had suspected a coup might take place, and he was somewhat surprised that Thaksin was willing to travel abroad when the political climate was so tense.

[1](#)3. (C) Banharn said he did not believe Thaksin's professed willingness to withdraw from politics. He said Thaksin would be able to return to Thailand, but only after the election and the installation of a new civilian government. According to Banharn, Thaksin's problems stemmed from the greed and substantial influence of his wife, Potjaman.

[1](#)4. (C) As for TRT, the party Thaksin formerly led, Banharn dismissively labeled it as "dead." Highlighting the number of prominent figures who either deserted the party or have become inactive, Banharn added that the party has lost its

ability to use the military, police, and civil service to garner votes for the party. He said TRT "cannot compete," and projected it would win 70 seats. (Comment: Banharn's calculation probably assumed a 500-seat House, similar to pre-coup. In such a legislature, 70 seats is a far cry from the 377 that TRT won in 2005, but still would represent a meaningful showing. End Comment.)

15. (C) Banharn predicted his own Chart Thai Party would gain seats, so long as the election was fair. (Note: Chart Thai won only 26 seats in 2005. End Note.) However, he said he did not want Chart Thai to grow too large, otherwise it would have to contend with the type of factionalism that had beset TRT.

CONSTITUTION

15. (C) Banharn said that it would be necessary for the constitution to mandate that Thailand's Prime Ministers be elected members of parliament, contrary to proposals some political figures had floated. Attempts to include provisions allowing exceptions -- even if only in times of crisis -- would cause turmoil. Banharn was less concerned about other ways in which the constitution might reshape politics. He was open to the idea of multi-member districts, saying that larger districts, which would make it easier for small parties to win seats in the House, would not necessarily mean a return to the instability that was common in the mid-1990's.

16. (C) It mattered little whether the constitution drafters would retain provisions for some seats to be allocated

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through a party list system, Banharn said. He also appeared ambivalent about the form of the next Senate. While some officials of his party have advocated that Senators be appointed to their positions, Banharn told the Ambassador that it might be possible to have another elected Senate -- it would depend on the rules, he said. The basic problem that Thailand confronted was its lack of development and low level of education. Accordingly, it would take years for Thailand to become a mature and stable democracy.

THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION

17. (C) Banharn expressed confidence that the military would extricate itself from politics after the next election. He largely dismissed the possibility of another coup, which has been the subject of speculation in light of growing criticism of the current administration's performance. The Ambassador stressed that any further move by the military to reshape the political landscape would lead to widespread criticism by the international community. Banharn characterized Prime Minister Surayud as a good and well-intentioned man. It would be difficult to find anyone to replace Surayud, Banharn said. Surayud's cabinet was less than impressive, however -- Banharn noted that new Finance Minister Chalongphob Sussangkarn was not particularly adept.

BAN ON PARTY ACTIVITIES

18. (C) Addressing TRT Party Leader Chaturon Chaiseng's defiance of a ban on political party activities (ref B), Banharn said that Chaturon had violated the law, and he had done so intentionally, as a provocation. Nevertheless, Banharn felt that the authorities would not follow through on their threats to prosecute him. (Note: Despite official restrictions on party activities, Banharn has stated publicly that Chart Thai officials will continue meeting with their constituents, as these meetings do not pose a security threat. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Banharn and his Chart Thai cohorts have been largely supportive of the military since the September coup. So when they insist that the Prime Minister must be an elected MP, despite trial balloons to the contrary that seem supported by conservative figures, we conclude that opposition to alternatives would be strong indeed. We also noted that Banharn and Chaturon have divergent views on support for TRT: Banharn feels TRT is far less popular than it used to be, whereas Chaturon feels TRT could win a majority of the House seats (ref A). We do not know which perspective is more accurate, but Banharn's assessment may be the premise from which he derives his confidence that Thailand can restore democratic rule fairly easily.

BOYCE